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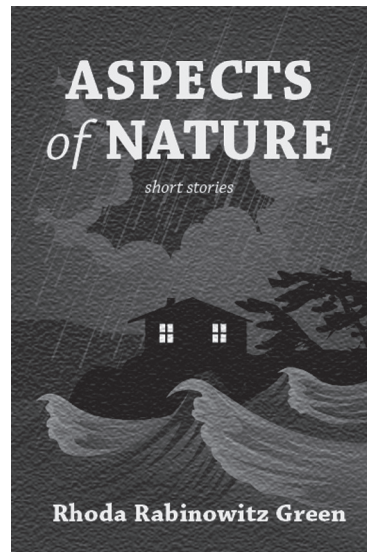
ASPECTS OF NATURE

Rhoda Rabinowitz Green
Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2016

REVIEWED BY MATTHEW
CORRIGAN

Though born in Philadelphia, the author of this volume speaks with an international and multi-cultural voice. Stories in this collection take place in California, England, Florida, the Warsaw Ghetto, Buchenwald, and, of course, Canada, where the author has resided for over forty years. The themes are timeless, human ones: the aggravations and humiliations of old age, memory loss, familial discord, the joys and tribulations of marriage, and man's inhuman treatment of man. These stories show a rare and sympathetic nature at work. Each carves out its own world in language—the mordant humour omnipresent but never intrusive, the imagery memorable, the dialogue at times pitch perfect (a rare gift), the rhythms finely tuned and seductive.

Many have a musical identity or musical theme at their centres, like the memoir of the renowned Polish pianist Maryan Filar, an immigrant to the United States after his incarceration at Buchenwald during the war. The author, an accomplished classical pianist herself, studied with



the maestro when he first arrived in America in the early fifties and tells his life story with poignancy and compassion. Filar, a child prodigy, had had his hand smashed by a cruel guard at Buchenwald, yet had gone on in the post war decades to become one of the world's great pianists.

Rhoda Rabinowitz Green captures poignantly the twenty-five year old pianist's ordeal when, returning to his home in the Warsaw Ghetto after living underground with the partisans, he finds the rest of his family gone, disappeared, never to be heard from again:

"Only imagine the anguish Maryan felt when he returned home, January 1943, to find his mother Ester, and Helen, his sister, vanished, like his father (two years before). Vanished: a faded space; a cupboard once cram-packed, now empty, a phantom presence, lingering odour of cigar, toilet water, shampoo. That day, the day that his mother and sister disappeared, he came home to the sound of hollow, all the human spiritual energy siphoned off from the home that had once vibrated with sounds from the piano, guitar, violin, singing and laughter, of family arguments and chastisements and tears."

But a deeper music at times permeates the prose, raising it to a

transcendent level. Consider this passage when the narrator recalls her decision to become a concert pianist:

One evening, no longer a child but a young woman of sixteen, she'd climbed, breathless, to the uppermost heights of Philadelphia's Academy of Music to hear the great Giesecking. *Schumann, Arabesque ...* a sound, simple, hushed, serene, floated upward, reached with, oh, such effortless clarity and resonance her insides trembled. *Debussy, Chopin ...* at the Steinway, he brushed the keys with fine, elongated fingers (spanning an octave), causing a spontaneous, unteachable thing to happen not simply to the notes, but *between*, something rhythmic and sonoric, moving forward and holding back, cheating and robbing, giving and adding, something called beauty and genius. All, liquid, each tone, phrase, shift in sentiment, flowed one from the other without jarring or angularity, the keyboard an orchestra. When he'd finished, gauzy tone-clusters lingered, cocooned in a profound silence no one was willing to break, dying their own death. She knew then what path she must take.

Stories are memorable for the insights, imaginative detail, beauty that they capture and convey in words—and for the memorability of their characters. These are human stories—the shadows of aging and the finality of death are never very far from any of the character's thoughts—with perhaps memory, mutability, mortality, the most central of their preoccupations. At times the language simply leaves the page and soars heavenward, such as in this closing section from the Filar memoir, after the author has visited

the famous pianist for the very last time in 2009. (Filar lived to age 95, having had his life's memories and musical genius wiped clean by Alzheimer's.) The passage aptly illustrates the writer's ability to capture emotion in words. Reflecting on these losses to such a beautiful mind and heavenly talent, the narrator observes:

But he's [Filar's] happy, spared the torment of some whose memories relive, with the same intensity of old, the unrelivable, their nights sleepless or riven with dreaming and redreaming the nightmare, their days troubled by the approach of night. Maryan, my Professor Filar, hangs onto his crystal shards, selective memories, his Gieseking glory, his Chopin *arabesques* and *cadenzas*.

So much of his life has disappeared, vanished. Where? I want to think the lost but divine memories have flown up to that starry cosmos where the Kabbalists believe scattered sparks of enlightenment will once again be united, where this fractured, suffering universe will be made whole. As for rediscovering those who were part of who he was and is, those calling his name, mystically channelling him through light-years, whispering "remember us," and "remember when," and "remember the time," who, brushing his back with a gossamer touch light as a Mozart melody, stir in him a ghostly sense of their presence, well, as for them, he'll find them in his book. [*From Buchenwald to Carnegie Hall*]

With the publication of this collection, Canadian literature gains a fresh, new, multivalenced voice, a voice to be listened to and praised.

Bravo, as we resplendently sing out in response to that art of all arts.

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MY LIFE ON THE ROAD

Gloria Steinem
New York: Random House, 2015

REVIEWED BY AMANDA
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My Life on the Road is both an autobiography and a history of feminist activism within the United States. Beginning by talking about her own childhood Steinem sets up her feminist roots. With a father always on the move and a mother suffering from the feminine mystique, Steinem started her life wanting to run away from the life both her parents led. Her literal life on the road, from birth, led her to travel across America and later India. At first, the work seems to be only an autobiography, spending much time on the backstory of Steinem's childhood, and moving into her work in India, but she then moves from the personal to the political describing her work on campuses and campaigns.

Her career as a journalist and desire to run away brought her to India. It was in India that she stopped dreading the road she was forced onto as a child and began to understand that it could teach her many things she would miss otherwise. From talking to local women, to campaigning, to lecturing, to taxi drivers telling their stories, Steinem shows us that travelling is a way to learn and to educate. Steinem's book is an example of how

travelling and interacting can create communities and build political support. Moving past her own life, Steinem shows the reader what it was like to be both a journalist and activist in the 1960s until the present day. She also lets us into the lives of the people she has worked with and met along the road, from Mrs Greene to Hilary Rodham Clinton.

Steinem gives us a personal story that sheds light on the many broad and historical books already written on the women's rights movement. It is her personal experiences that provide the details missing in other works. Rather than simply seeing the facts we get a worm's eye view of what it was like to be a part of the movement. The historic National Women's Conference or the "two-year process [that] probably shortened all our lives," is given a deeper understanding by looking at the little details. The organizing, the fights, and the fear are displayed in full view. Steinem's own fears of public speaking and of failure are also on display. Each historical moment teaches us something about America and Steinem. After the National Women's Conference, we see a jump in confidence for both Steinem and the women's movement: "Before Houston, I had said that women could run huge public events at least as well as men. After Houston, I believed it." We not only see the conference as a historical moment for women's rights, but as a catalyst for change and confidence in individual women. It is this view, that Steinem brings to all the events covered in her work.

Steinem unearths many small moments within the women's movement throughout her travels. Many works talk about the importance of talking circles and lectures, but Steinem shows us exactly how they work. How, with the help of her speaking partner Dorothy Pitman Hughes, they create trust and support within